

# CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' FROM DESERT TO OCEAN WAVES

*California welcomed us with the captivating sight of the Imperial Sand Dunes rising like a mini Sahara on each side of Interstate 8.*

By Rose Muenker  
Photography by David Muenker

A road sign proclaimed “Sea Level.” Only 4,000 feet in elevation to climb and we’d arrive at our home for a few months—Sacred Rocks Reserve RV Park. On the ascent, red blossoms beautified ocotillo cacti. Huge brown boulders formed nubby mountains. Intriguing rock shapes teased us to give them fanciful names.

Twice we were stopped at checkpoints: one to inquire about produce in our possession, the other to ask our citizenship. Soon we would discover that U.S. Border Patrol checkpoints are a way of life here and need to be considered when calculating drive times.

The RV park sits 12 miles off I-8, 65 miles east of San Diego and a few miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border. The combined population of the three closest towns is only 5,000. The nearest supermarket is 40 miles away, but two San Diego County branch libraries are within 15 miles. Small farms and ranches and the Campo Indian reservation cover the surrounding countryside.

Our site backs up to 100 acres of thick, high desert vegetation. Here our dog Sonya can run free—at least until



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1 Julian boasts several bakeries. 2 Fresh baked apple pie are a main attraction in Julian. 3 The Imperial Sand Dunes rise in southeast California. 4 Locals fish, watch surfers and admire the view from the Ocean Beach pier. 5 Carrizo Badlands form a rugged landscape in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.



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the rattlesnakes come out of hibernation. Rain brings out the sweet aroma of sage and awakens the tiny bell-shaped blossoms on manzanita shrubs. The air is pure. Unobstructed by light pollution, the night sky scintillates with countless stars. After the owls hoot or coyotes howl, silence blankets the night.

The immediate environs symbolize the yin and yang of this region. In the RV park, nature trails, wildlife and an outdoor meditative labyrinth, patterned after the one in Chartres Cathedral, encourage spiritual contemplation and connection with nature. Next door, the Minutemen Civil Defense compound serves as a constant reminder of the heated debate about how to handle illegal immigration.

## EXPLORING OUR HUGE SOCIAL BACKYARD

From dunes to vineyards, the surrounding region offers a variety of fun getaways. Among them is Julian, about an hour northeast of San Diego. The historic gold mining town’s current claim to fame is apples, especially in the form of pies. At Apple Alley Bakery, I swooned over the sweetness and texture of my slice of caramel apple pecan pie. David raved about his piece of traditional apple pie a la mode.

While many day trippers shopped, took a mile-long train ride or toured a gold mine, we explored the outskirts. There we found Menghini Winery offering \$5 tastings of Blue Door wines. At a nearby orchard, visitors picked Jonathan apples for \$10 a bag.

Other days, David took to the desert, intent on exploring its unique landscape with a photographic eye. Sun- and wind-burned, he returned from McCain Valley, Anzo-Borrego Desert and other protected areas with exciting tales of mine shafts, wild goats and palm tree oases.

## DOWN MEXICO WAY

The dental tourism trend caught our attention when fellow RVers raved about the affordable, quality work available in Tecate, Mexico, just 20 miles away. We decided to vet their dentist with checkups. One sunny Friday, we parked at the border, walked into Tecate through the pedestrian gateway and waited on a corner for the dentist to pick us up, a courtesy he provides his U.S. clients.

In his modern office, young Dr. Rey repaired David’s chipped tooth and gave both of us checkups and cleanings. His personable



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1 Fascinating boulders beautify Sacred Rocks Reserve. 2 David grins beside the Mexican dental office banner. 3 A variety of cacti hug the desert floor.

## WHEN YOU GO

Julian, CA  
julianca.com

Sacred Rocks  
Reserve RV Park  
Sacredrocksreserve.com

San Diego CVB  
sandiego.org

manner, skilled procedures and fluent English made us feel at ease. The total bill came to US\$90, payable in cash or personal check.

Before heading home, we strolled along the neighboring streets, bought fresh-out-of-the-oven tortillas at a bakery, and listened to street guitarists while eating mouth-watering tacos. Passersby greeted us with smiles and *buenas tardes*. We'll come back another day to explore more of this friendly city.

### HEADING "DOWN THE HILL"

When backcountry folks head to San Diego, they say they're going "down the hill." On the way, the road drops 4,000 feet in elevation, the temperature rises 10 or more degrees and the population density increases exponentially. At the bottom of the hill, the vibrancy, attractions and amenities of city life abound.

We've only begun to explore San Diego's many attractions because the ocean keeps luring us to the harbor and beach. We can't get enough of digging our toes in the sand, wading in the frigid Pacific and being lulled by the rhythm of the waves. At

Ocean Beach, we strolled out on the pier where netters tried their luck at catching Pacific spiny lobsters. An eclectic mix of sleek houses and beach cottages in various states of repair line the residential streets. And all walks of life hang out along the beach wall.

To our delight, San Diego has off-leash dog beaches. Our favorite is on Coronado Island where Sonya romps to her canine glee while we enjoy views of the islands off Mexico, historic Hotel del Coronado and the ocean's many moods. The lovely drive to the shore past grand homes and upscale shops adds to the beauty of this outing.

Much more awaits us to explore during our stay in southern California. We'll let wanderlust direct us! ●

*Rose and David Muenker, a travel writer-photographer team based in Denver, are traveling the roads of North America by motorhome. Read about their adventures in every issue of Out of Denver and on their blog davidandrose.com.*